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ABSTRACT

This study explored the differences between African American and Latina female adolescents who desire to become pregnant and those who do not. Five hundred and thirty-one sexually experienced, never pregnant adolescents completed surveys containing questions about demographics, sexual behavior and contraceptive use, sexual and contraceptive behavioral intentions, attitudes toward condoms and birth control, substance use, quality of mother-daughter relationship, and mother-daughter communication about sexual issues. Medical and self-report data regarding pregnancies in the subsequent 6 months was also obtained. Adolescents who desired pregnancy had sex more frequently, engaged in more unproteccted sex, and became pregnant in the following 6 months at a higher rate. They were significantly more likely to have poor relationships with their mothers, fewer siblings, and higher rates of substance use. The results suggest the importance of a family systems approach to studying intentional teenage pregnancy. (Author)

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Intentional Teenage Pregnancy: Correlates of Children Who Want Children

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Abstract

This study explored the differences between African American and Latina female adolescents who desire to become pregnant and those who do not. Five hundred and thirty-one sexually experienced, never pregnant adolescents completed surveys containing questions about demographics, sexual behavior and contraceptive use, sexual and contraceptive behavioral intentions, attitudes towards condoms and birth control, substance use, quality of mother-daughter relationship, and mother-daughter communication about sexual issues. Medical and self-report data regarding pregnancies in the subsequent 6 months was also obtained. Adolescents who desired pregnancy had sex more frequently, engaged in more unprotected sex, and became pregnant in the following 6 months at a higher rate. They were significantly more likely to have poor relationships with their mothers, fewer siblings, and higher rates of substance use. The results suggest the importance of a family systems approach to studying intentional teenage pregnancy.

Intentional Teenage Pregnancy:
Correlates of Children Who Want Children

Adolescent pregnancy continues to be a major social problem in the United States. The Alan Guttmacher Institute's 1994 report "Sex and America's Teenagers" found that 12% of sexually active women aged 15-19 years become pregnant each year, 21% of sexually active women aged 15-19 become pregnant every year, and 60% of intended pregnancies among women under age 20 occur among unmarried women (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994).

Whereas the majority of adolescent pregnancies are unplanned, 15% are planned (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). Therefore, reproductive ignorance and contraceptive failure cannot explain all instances of teenage pregnancy. In many cases, pregnancy results from a conscious desire to have a child.

The purpose of this study was to identify psycho-social and demo-graphic variables that differentiate between sexually active adolescents who desire to become pregnant teenagers and those who do not.

Method

Subjects

The participants in this investigation were 531 sexually experienced female adolescents, aged 12 to 19 years who were never previously pregnant. They were patients at an adolescent medicine clinic who were participating in a woman's health intervention study. The survey data reported here were collected at baseline. Pregnancies resulting in the subsequent 6 months were determined from clinic records and self-reports in 6 month follow-up questionnaires.

Approximately 70% of participants were African-American and 30% were Latinas, primarily Puerto Rican (93%). All qualified for medical assistance. The pregnancy rate in the clinic population was 12-14% annually.

The participants were divided into two groups. The want-to-be- pregnant group consisted of those who reported trying to become pregnant in the past three months, planning to become pregnant in the next 3 months, or both (n = 79). The do-not-want-to-be-pregnant group included those who said that they were neither trying nor planning to get pregnant (n = 452).

Procedure

Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire that included questions regarding demographics, sexual behavior and contraceptive use, sexual and contraceptive behavioral intentions, attitudes towards condoms and birth control, substance use, quality of mother-daughter relationship, and mother-daughter communication about sexual issues. Medical examinations at baseline and 6 months into the study were required for participation in the study.

Results

First we wanted to confirm whether or not the want-to-be-pregnant group engaged in more behaviors that would cause pregnancy and whether or not they actually become pregnant at a higher rate. Table 1 shows that this group had sex more often, had more unprotected sex, and had lower intentions to use contraceptives. Figure 1 displays the higher 6 month pregnancy rates of teens who want to be pregnant versus those who do not.

Several demographic and family environment factors were examined for correlations with intended pregnancy among teenagers. There were no differences in age or ethnicity. Mother-daughter communication about sex issues, living with both parents, having parents who were still married to each other, and age at which parents divorced were also not related to whether or not an adolescent wanted to get pregnant. There were, however, marginally

significant differences in mothers' education level. Mothers who had completed high school were more likely to have daughters who did not desire pregnancy, ($t = 1.71$, $p = .09$).

Table 2 displays the family environment variables that did significantly differentiate between the two groups of adolescents. Surprisingly, number of siblings was significantly related, but contrary to common predictions, the more siblings the adolescent had, the less likely she was to desire pregnancy. The adolescents who wanted to get pregnant also had significantly lower scores on the quality of the mother-daughter relationship questionnaire.

Problem behavior theory (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) states that teenage pregnancy is one facet of a cluster of problem behaviors often displayed in unison in some adolescents. This cluster can include substance use, early sexual activity, delinquency, and school failure. We found some support for this theory. Teens who want to become pregnant report using more substances (cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana), were younger when they had their first sexual experience, and have lower educational aspirations (Table 2).

Conclusions

The results of this study show that family systems may be crucial to target in the prevention of intentional teenage pregnancy. The fact that teens who want to become pregnant had significantly lower scores for quality of mother-daughter relationship supports the theory that those who plan pregnancy may be looking for love and emotional support and hope to get it from the children that they bear. A related but contrapredicted finding was that those who had more siblings did not desire pregnancy. Number of siblings is frequently seen as a stressor and risk factor in adolescents' lives because of diminished parental and physical resources. But that is not what emerged here. It is possible that

teens who have younger siblings do not glamorize having children and realize that it is a difficult and stressful task, one not likely to solve their problems. In addition, older or same-age siblings may act as additional social supports, reducing the drive to seek support from having a child.

Substance use may be related to clusters of problem behaviors such as adolescent pregnancy (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), but family systems can have an impact on problem behaviors. Jessor and Jessor (1977) found that when mothers had more traditional ideology, their children were less likely to engage in problem behaviors.

Inasmuch as these data were taken from a study that was not designed to investigate teenage pregnancy, not every potentially relevant variable was measured. Nevertheless, these results suggest several important avenues of further study, education, and intervention in the battle to reduce teenage pregnancy and improve adolescents' lives and futures.

References

Alan Guttmacher Institute (1994). Sex and America's teenagers. New York: Author.

Jessor, R., & Jessor, S. L. (1977). Problem behavior and psychosocial development: A longitudinal study of youth. New York: Academic Press.

Table 1

Means for Self-Reported Pregnancy-Causing Behaviors

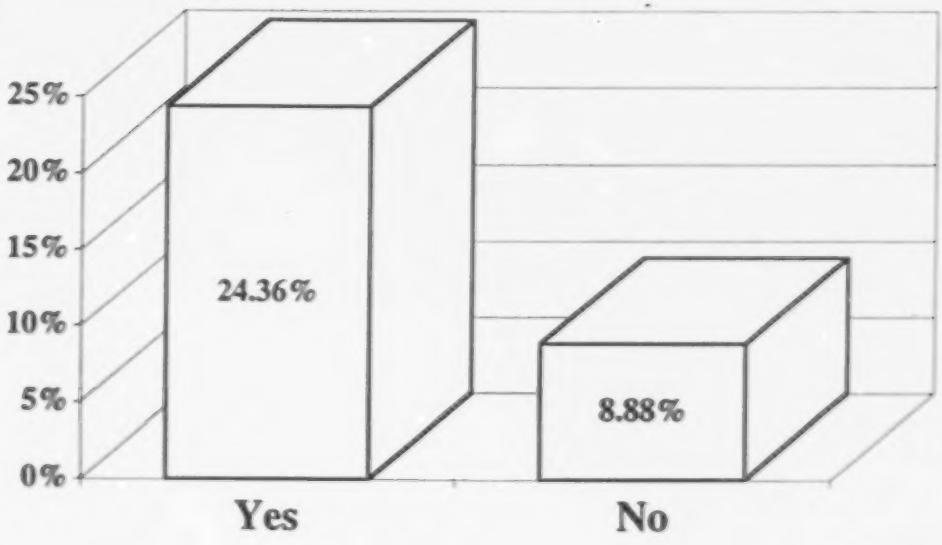
	Group	
Behavior	WantPreg-Yes	WantPreg-No
Times had sex in the past 3 months $p < .02$	9.06	6.32
Days had sex without condoms in the past 3 months $p < .03$	4.97	2.02
Sex in the past 3 months with birth control pills (1-5, never to always) $p < .001$	1.67	2.30
Sex in the past 3 months with condom (1-5, never to always) $p < .001$	2.63	3.45
Intentions to use contraceptives (1-5, strongly disagree to strongly agree) $p < .001$	3.69	4.24

Table 2

Means for Pregnancy-Desiring Correlates

	Group	
Correlate	WantPreg-Yes	WantPreg-No
Number of siblings $p < .02$	1.31	1.72
Quality of mother-daughter relationship $p < .001$	0.51	0.64
Number of substances used (0-3, cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana) $p < .001$	1.69	1.05
Age at first sex $p < .08$	13.71	14.04
Highest level of education they would like to complete (means are scores on educational level scale, not grade in school) $p < .07$	8.98	9.69

Percentage of Adolescents Becoming Pregnant Within 6 Months



Want to Become Pregnant?